Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE
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COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
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THE HONORABLE HELEN CHENOWETH
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The Forest Health Crisis in Alaska
Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
March 23, 1999

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Jack Phelps and I am the Executive Director of the Alaska Forest Association, the statewide forest products industry trade association for Alaska. The AFA represents approximately 100 member companies, mostly small businesses, doing business in the forest products industry in Alaska. In addition, the AFA represents approximately 200 Associate member companies who provide goods and services to Alaska's statewide timber industry. The mission of the Alaska Forest Association is to advance the restoration, promotion and maintenance of a healthy, viable forest products industry, contributing to economic and ecological health in Alaska's forests and communities.

The state of Alaska contains within its borders 248,000,000 acres of federal land, including the two largest forests in the 191,000 acre National Forest System. These two forests are the Tongass and the Chugach National Forests encompassing nearly 17 million acres and more than 5.5 million acres, respectively.

Because of the high amount of annual rainfall in Southeast Alaska, fire is not a major problem in the Tongass National Forest. The principal disturbance event in the Tongass is windthrow. Large windthrow

events of up to several hundred acres are not uncommon, and if the event occurs in areas designated for timber management, the Forest Service commonly includes salvage opportunities in its timber sale program.

From a forest health and stand diversity standpoint, the creeping mortality of Alaska cedar (commonly referred to as yellow-cedar) is of greater concern. Approximately 479,000 acres of yellow-cedar decline has been mapped on the Tongass. The decline has been developing over many years, but it appeared to have accelerated in 1996 and 1997. Researchers are divided over the exact cause of this Alaska cedar decline, but many believe it to be related to soil conditions. Whatever the cause, it presents strong potential for economic salvage opportunities. Region 10, together with researchers from Oregon State University and the Forest Products Laboratory at Madison, Wisconsin are investigating the properties of dead and standing Alaska cedar. AFA member companies are cooperating in these studies.

A much larger forest health crisis is facing Alaska in the South-central region of the state, affecting the Chugach National Forest as well as state, private and other federal ownerships in the area. This is the unprecedented epidemic of spruce bark beetle infestation on the Kenai Peninsula, in the Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna areas and in the Copper River valley. The epidemic has resulted in heavy mortality of white, Sitka and Lutz spruce on more than 3 million acres. In many areas, mortality associated with the beetle infestation exceeds 85 percent and in some parts of the Kenai is 100 percent. Impacts include loss of the merchantable value of trees, wildlife and fish habitat, scenic qualities and the prospect of long term stand conversion and fire hazards. The stand conversion problem is exacerbated by the prevalence of invasive grasses which will impede and, in some cases, prevent natural reforestation.

Forestry responses to this heavy mortality have been mixed. Alaska Native corporation landowners have been harvesting their trees, salvaging value and creating economic activity in both the western Kenai and in the Copper River area. The state, though initially slow to act, has been aggressive in recent years in selling dead and dying timber from beetle infested stands. Nearly 1.5 million seedlings have been planted on state lands in the past 5 years, all paid for by the timber sale program which harvested primarily beetle killed and beetle damaged trees. This mechanical reforestation will ensure that the harvested state lands will in the future host a healthy spruce forest once again - a situation that would be unlikely had the state chosen to leave the dead trees untended.

Federal land managers, on the other hand, have been paralyzed, and have taken virtually no action to address the massive loss of spruce forests, either on the Kenai or in the Copper River area. In 1996, under the provisions of the salvage law passed by Congress in 1995, the Forest Service prepared NEPA documents for the salvage of 116.6 million board feet of timber from 18,520 acres. The cost of the NEPA documentation ran to more than $7 million. The sales were challenged in court, and after spending approximately $35,000 on litigation, the Forest Service simply decided to drop the salvage program. That it did this at a time when a very high timber market was developing, makes the decision all the more indefensible. The agency thus chose to throw away the taxpayers' money already spent on NEPA and to forgo activities that would have been beneficial to both the local economy and the forest.

Had the federal agency followed the lead of the state, the Chugach National Forest could have used the salvage sale program to ensure the reforestation of such ecologically important and tourism sensitive areas as Kenai Lake and Moose Pass.

It is important to note that not all, or even the majority, of beetle-damaged federal lands in Southcentral Alaska are under the control of the USDA Forest Service. Much of the heavily infested land in the Copper River area is controlled by the National Park Service. About one third of the beetle affectedlands on the

Kenai peninsula are under federal ownership. The largest part of that is on the 1.9 millionacre Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Last year alone, the Refuge suffered active beetle infestation on more than 23,000 acres. On the other hand, total affected acreage on the Chugach National Forest (including both active infestations and mortality from prior years)is just over 3O,OOOacres. Both the Forest Service and the. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could**,** and should, allow for the harvest of some of this timber to provide for mechanical reforestation. Long term forest health and wildlife would both benefit from such activity.

Rapid action on the part of the landowner is critical to making the relationship between timber harvest and forest restoration effective. When the beetle infested trees die, they begin to lose value as sawlogs within the first 3 years. This is the period during which the greatest economic return is available to provide for the costs of reforestation. From 4 to 7 years after mortality, the spruce retain value for chips and, to some extent, house logs and some other uses. By the 8th year, most of the economic value is lost, and the opportunity for timber harvest to pay the costs of forest regeneration is lost. For this reason, it is appropriate for Congress to provide for an expedited process to allow the government to manage its lands in a responsible manner, taking advantage of the marketplace to fund that management.

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